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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000748

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO A/S SILVERBERG AND PDAS WARLICK
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/KUMAR/PHEE
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER/GAVITO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/21/2018
TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PINR UNSC SA LE
SUBJECT: LEBANON: GEMAYEL: U.S. NEEDS TO COUNTER SYRIAN
INFLUENCE ON FUTURE PRESIDENT SLEIMAN

REF: A. BEIRUT 733

     ¶B. BEIRUT 746

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Former president and Kataeb (Phalange) leader Amine
Gemayel expressed to the Charge on May 22 his disappointment
with the agreement reached in Doha. He credited himself for
the agreement's omission of an endorsement of Hizballah's
legitimacy as a resistance movement. He is pleased that the
issue of Hizballah's arms will be put on the table in a
future dialogue.

¶2. (C) Gemayel is concerned about electing Lebanese Armed
Forces Commander Michel Sleiman as president without a
constitutional amendment. To counter Syrian influence on
Sleiman, Gemayel suggested the U.S. "mentally kidnap" the
army commander, and refrain from making "counterproductive,
junk" statements of support. He is considering developing a
party platform for Kataeb when running in the spring 2009
parliamentary elections. End summary.

BABY STEPS ON
HIZBALLAH'S ARMS

¶3. (C) The Charge, accompanied by PolOff, met former
president and leader of Kataeb (Phalange) party Amine Gemayel
at his 500-year old residence in Bikfayya on May 22.
Acknowledging that he and the other political leaders kept
late hours negotiating in Doha (Ref A), Gemayel recalled that
he sensed at 1830 the final night (May 20) that a deal would
soon be reached. He said that he knows firsthand that
several side deals were made before the final agreement.
Nevertheless, he confessed, "All of us, even Hizballah, were
surprised by the Doha agreement when we saw it."

¶4. (C) Gemayel relayed that in Doha, he insisted with the
Qataris that the agreement not contain a statement
sanctioning Hizballah's arms. The baseline statement, he
knew, would focus on no party using arms internally, but he
feared that there would be a second sentence that would
"bless Hizballah's legitimacy." (Note: Ultimately the
statement was confined to calling for no internal use of
weapons and a dialogue about weapons in the future. End

note.)

¶5. (C) Gemayal stressed it is now essential to "put
Hizballah's arms on the table, not necessarily to solve the
issue, but to put the 'holy' issue on the table." When the
argument is on the table, it becomes more difficult to oppose
it. He said he was disappointed that the agreement did not
make references to UNSC Resolutions 1559 or 1701.

¶6. (C) Gemayel ranted about how Hizballah's "raison d'etre"
is now non-existent. Since the deployment of UNIFIL in the
south, Gemayel noted, Shia-dominated Hizballah has had to
move further north into predominately-Christian Jezzine, and
the Sunni town of Sidon. He reasoned that this meant
Hizballah could no longer be a Shia resistance in non-Shia
areas. He stated vehemently, "We have to exploit this loss
of legitimacy!"

DOHA AGREEMENT VAGUE
ON ELECTING A PRESIDENT

¶7. (C) Expressing his reservations about electing Lebanese
Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman as president
without a constitutional amendment, Gemayel said he may not
attend the May 25 ceremony because he does not want to
witness "this heresy" against the constitution. (Note: The
constitution stipulates that senior government officials,
like Sleiman, spend two years out of office before being
eligible to run for president. End note.) Gemayel relayed
that the document they signed in Doha was vague about how to
elect a president.

¶8. (C) Gemayel suspects that Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri
is not inclined to amend the constitution, and Gemayal
believes that not doing an amendment would be a "dangerous
precedent." Gemayel reasoned that Berri is looking to avoid
recognizing the legitimacy of the Siniora government by
convening parliament to amend the constitution. However,
Gemayel proposed, the government could resign on the morning
designated for the election (May 25), form an interim
government to amend the constitution, and then hold the
election later the same afternoon. He argued that the
government already has been in caretaker status for months,
referring to resigned ministers who continue to work (Ref B).

NEED TO "MENTALLY
KIDNAP" SLEIMAN

¶9. (C) Sighing, Gemayel said, "Sleiman is another problem.
He is secretive. I know he made a deal with Syria!" He
continued, saying that Syria started to become concerned when
Sleiman, who was groomed from the beginning as "Syria's
baby," was talking to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and March 14
leader Saad Hariri in November and December 2007. "Now," he
said, "Syria has regained its full confidence in Sleiman. I
know first-hand Sleiman gave strong assurances to Syria."

¶10. (C) He pressed for full support from the U.S., Saudi
Arabia, Egypt, and France, while expressing his concern that
France will "play games...(French FM Bernard) Kouchner is a
clown!" Specifically, he believes France will try to
maintain a relationship with both Hizballah and March 14.

¶11. (C) The U.S. should provide its full backing to Sleiman
to counter the strong Syrian influence, he recommended. "You
should mentally kidnap Sleiman!" he joked. He also advised
that the Charge maintain a strong relationship with the army
commander; Charge assured Gemayel that she would try to see
him before he is elected president. Gemayel added that he
suspected Sleiman would try to form his own political bloc.

ASSESSING DOHA AND
INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

¶12. (C) Defending March 14's performance in Doha, Gemayel said it felt abandoned and did not have the means to act with more strength. "The settlement in Doha reflects how the balance is here in Lebanon," he stated. He added that March 14 leaders feel "embarrassed to face the public because the opposition achieved a victory in the cabinet division and electoral law. Why have we been waiting for a president since November only to gain nothing?"

¶13. (C) He reported that Saudi Arabia is "sad because first, the negotiations were held in Doha, and secondly, because they share our feelings that it was a failure." He said that both Saudi Arabia and Egypt appeared weak to those in Doha. He mentioned that the Iranian Ambassador to Lebanon phoned him this morning to "congratulate" him on the agreement.

¶14. (C) Moreover, he said, the USG's string of statements and declarations were "less than helpful." Naming the "Siniora government" in particular, he explained, was harmful because PM Fouad Siniora is not the head of the government. Dismissing Friends of Lebanon meetings and the like, a frustrated Gemayel categorized these statements of support as "counterproductive junk." He declared, "Instead of walking softly and carrying a big stick, the USG talks loudly and carries a toothpick". He recommended the USG elaborate to March 14 on what it is willing to do and accept.

PARTY PLATFORMS FOR
PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

¶15. (C) According to Gemayel, the Doha agreement is a "truce," allowing all sides some breathing space. He suggested that to profit from this truce, he and the other March 14 leaders should reconsider their political system.

For example, he said, candidates should establish and present platforms to the voters. He added that as leader of Kataeb, he is considering developing a Kataeb platform. Remarking that Chris Reid, a MEPI-funded International Republican Institute strategic communications consultant who has been working with March 14, has proven himself very useful, Gemayel said Lebanon's future depends on its younger generation to build and modernize their country.
SISON